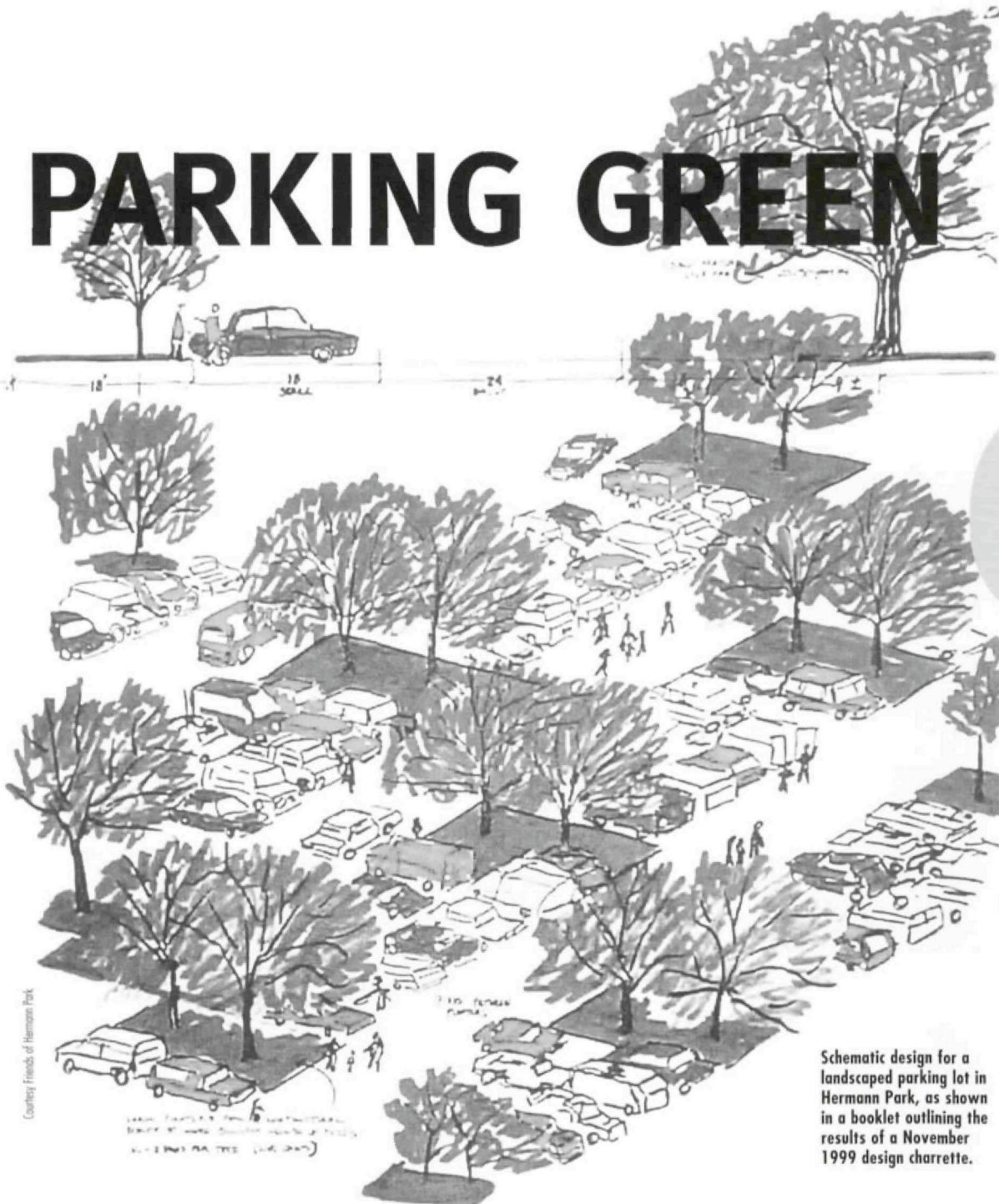


# PARKING GREEN

A DESIGN CHARRETTE TAKES  
ON ONE OF HERMANN PARK'S  
BIGGEST PROBLEMS



Schematic design for a landscaped parking lot in Hermann Park, as shown in a booklet outlining the results of a November 1999 design charrette.

Cars have long been a major conundrum for Hermann Park. Though it can't survive without them — the organizations that are the park's lifeblood wouldn't last long if they had to depend on walk-in visitors — at times it seems that it can't survive with them either. Crowded parking lots, traffic jams, and hovering exhaust fumes are hardly the attributes park proponents would choose to promote the virtues of urban green space.

Nonetheless, they are the attributes that have to be dealt with. In November 1999, for the first time in Hermann Park's history, a design charrette was held for just that purpose. The idea for the charrette came from the Friends of Hermann Park, a group that knows from experience how difficult the issue of cars and parking in the park can be. In 1994, a master plan for Hermann Park commissioned by the Friends suggested that most parking be moved from the center of the park to smaller perimeter lots. Reasonable as that sounded, it was anathema to such institutions as the Houston Zoo and Miller Outdoor Theater, which didn't want their patrons to have to walk long distances.

Disagreement over what to do about traffic and parking led to no action. For the second half of the 1990s, while work began on restoring portions of Hermann Park, the issue of what to do about cars remained unresolved.

Last year, the Friends decided it was time to put the issue of parking back on the table. It was, says Roksan Okan-Vick, Executive Director of the Friends of Hermann Park, a good time to do so. "All of the institutions that are part of the park had matured a bit," she says. "They had come to realize that they weren't going to solve the problem individually. So we needed to come up with a compromise we could all live with." With Houston Endowment providing the funding, invitations to join in a charrette were issued to all the park's stakeholders. Included were the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, the Houston Zoo, Miller Outdoor Theater, the Garden Center, the Judson Robinson Center, the Houston Museum of Natural Science, Metro, and the Texas Medical Center, among others. Despite their sometimes contentious relationships, none of the organizations declined to attend.

The charrette was held November 2-4 at the Hermann Park Clubhouse, and it didn't take long, Okan-Vick says, to be reminded that everyone had sacred cows they hoped to protect. The Friends wanted as much green as possible; the zoo didn't want to give up front door access; Miller Theater wanted to make sure that show delivery vehicles could easily get where they needed to go. At the same time there were some surprises. Going in, everyone had assumed that the zoo was, in Okan-Vick's phrase, "the 800 pound gorilla, the real issue to deal with." But the charrette revealed that the most severe parking problem belonged to Miller Outdoor Theater. The zoo had more visitors, but they came at different times, and were relatively easy to accommodate. Miller's patrons, on the other hand, came and went in a group, and put more of a strain on parking.

In the end, the charrette settled on 18 proposals. Among the major proposals was one to retain parking in the park's center, but to consolidate the scattered parking lots into two major and two minor lots that could be landscaped. To that end, it was also suggested that Golf Course Drive,

which now separates parking lots, be realigned to lose its current curve. Instead, it would run along the west edge of the park next to the golf course, allowing the lots to be combined on the east side of the street.

Among the other suggestions; designate a lot for school buses, so they could be all parked together rather than along perimeter roads; work with Metro to establish a shuttle bus system for use at major events; consider relocating the Garden Center parking to be more efficiently served from Hermann Drive; and go to fee-based parking and parking meters during the day to help prevent the lots being filled by area workers looking for free parking.

One of the simpler proposals was to appoint a traffic and events coordinator. "What we found is that often the problem is less a lack of parking than a lack of coordination," says Okan-Vick. "People weren't talking to each other, and they ended up scheduling their special events at the same time, when everyone would be competing for a parking space. We realized we need to stagger the peak days, stagger the peak hours. And that meant we needed someone who could keep an eye on the schedules of all the different organizations and help manage them."

In March 2000, a booklet outlining the charrette's suggestions was sent to Mayor Lee Brown and members of City Council, as well as Parks and Recreation Director Oliver Spellman Jr. Spellman, whose support is crucial if the charrette's ideas are to make it to reality, says he likes much of what he's seen, though he cautions that money could be an issue. "When you talk about addressing the three parking lots adjacent to the old clubhouse, and straightening the road, that's a \$2-\$3 million project," he says. "So the first thing I want to do is sell the administration on the fact that this is a priority that we have to really start targeting funding for."

Still, notes Okan-Vick, at least now it's known what needs funding. "We have the road map, we have something we've all agreed on," she says. "Now the issue will be how well we can follow it." — MJS